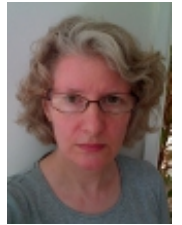


# Despite substantial gains in recent German regional elections, the Alternative for Germany may struggle to consolidate its federal presence

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/10/28/despite-substantial-gains-in-recent-german-regional-elections-the-alternative-for-germany-may-struggle-to-consolidate-its-federal-presence/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/10/28/despite-substantial-gains-in-recent-german-regional-elections-the-alternative-for-germany-may-struggle-to-consolidate-its-federal-presence/)

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*Following a run of successes in the German regions of Thuringia, Brandenburg and Saxony, Germany's anti-Eurozone party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) is riding high in the polls. **Patricia Hogwood** writes, however, that the party may struggle to translate this success into the federal arena. In particular, the key concerns of the AfD party elites – external trade and Eurozone reform – sit awkwardly with the largely domestic concerns of their voting public, which centre on labour market and welfare state reforms and immigration. Unless the AfD can reconcile these interests, the party risks implosion under the twin pressures of warring elite factions and electoral volatility.*



The first signs of the AfD's potential to shake up German governance came with the [federal election of September 2013](#) when it just failed to breach the five per cent threshold for a share of the party-list seats in parliament. For a party barely two years old, [4.7 per cent](#) of the federal vote was nothing short of a triumph. The timing of the federal election left the party in the media spotlight in the run-up to the May 2014 European election.

Along with Eurosceptic parties from other member states, the AfD performed particularly well, registering [7.1 per cent](#) of the federal vote at its first appearance in European parliamentary elections. This gave the party [7 of Germany's 96 seats](#) in the European Parliament. The AfD's electoral and media presence was consolidated in this autumn's [regional elections](#) in eastern Länder, where it gained 12.2 per cent of the party-list vote in Brandenburg, 10.6 per cent in Thuringia and 9.7 per cent in Saxony. Although it is unlikely that the AfD will be included in any regional coalition government, its substantial vote share will guarantee a media presence and policy influence on the regional and federal agenda.

## The AfD: a new force in German politics?

However encouraging the party may find these election gains, it remains far from certain that the AfD will become a fixture in Germany's electoral politics. The reasons for this lie in the special circumstances channelling the regional vote and the party's struggle to develop from a single-issue party to one with a broader electoral appeal.

Founded in 2013, the AfD occupies a unique position in the German party system. It has been dubbed the 'German UKIP', but this is rather misleading. Nigel Farage, UKIP's leader, has described the AfD as '[a bit academic](#)'. Its leadership is [representative](#) of a German conservative intellectual and business elite. Unlike UKIP, it does not reject EU membership altogether. It [professes its support](#) for a European Union 'based on subsidiarity instead of centralism, and on competition instead of enforced conformity and harmonization'. While supporting the European project overall, the AfD is campaigning to radically reform the EU's monetary system, reserving German withdrawal from the Euro as a last resort. The AfD MEPs sit in the [European Conservatives and Reformists Group](#) (ECR) of the European Parliament, along with the UK Conservatives, rather than the more right-leaning [Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy](#) (EFDD), which houses UKIP.

In the recent regional elections, the AfD no doubt benefited from the 'grand coalition' between the two largest parties, centre-right [CDU](#) and centre-left [SPD](#), at federal level. Left with no real alternative government party, conservative voters have been drawn to the AfD as a 'respectable' protest vote rather than to the more radical ideological extremes of the [Left Party](#) (Die Linke) or the [National Democratic Party of Germany](#) (NPD).

By the autumn regional elections, the AfD had added to its single-issue anti-Eurozone profile with a conservative agenda including immigration restrictions, law and order- and pro-family measures. This appealed to disenchanted CDU voters and supporters of the liberal FDP, the former 'kingmaker' in German coalition politics that now looks on the verge of [collapse as an electoral force](#). For these voters, the AfD is a bastion of hope against the 'middle-class anxiety' generated by rapid social and economic change and the threat of downward social mobility.

Moreover, the AfD is the only plausible Eurosceptic party in the German electoral landscape. Germany's foreign policy interests remain focused on EU economic policy. At least until German unification in 1990 public support for European integration was widespread. Now, as the cost of EU membership rises for Germany, the AfD can claim electoral ownership of the popular backlash. In challenging government orthodoxy in this area, the AfD has stimulated media and public debate.



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Finally, the AfD's regional vote was probably boosted by a tendency towards higher voting volatility in the eastern Länder. With the partial exception of the Left Party, the German federal parties all have a western heritage. Their stance developed to reflect social structures such as class, religion and region in post-war West Germany. For eastern voters socialised in the German Democratic Republic under radically different social structures, the political parties do not engender the same sense of identity as for western voters. This means that easterners' voting preferences are less strongly linked to a specific party.

When it comes to entrenching itself at federal level, the AfD faces some challenges common to all new parties in Germany. Party structures are regionally based and new parties struggle to gain critical mass and to link up across the regions. The AfD must now prove that its appeal transcends Germany's eastern Länder by repeating its success at the upcoming western regional elections in wealthy Hamburg in February 2015, and then in the more deprived region of Bremen in May.

At federal level, it is difficult for a small party to gain the crucial five per cent party-list vote that ensures block representation. Current polls show that if there were a federal election this Sunday, the AfD would comfortably vault the threshold with 7.5 – 8 per cent of the party-list vote. However, it is not unusual for outlier parties to gain higher levels of support between federal elections, which may subsequently evaporate as the next federal contest approaches.

Other challenges are more specific. One is the ideological gulf between the 'market radical' stance of the original founders and the conservative retrenchers that appear to make up the party's voting support. Many of the political elite are baffled by the backward-looking, '20<sup>th</sup> century' profile of their own voters. For the elite, a more alarming tendency is the growing nationalist appeal of the party, which runs counter to their outlook and EU single market strategy. Recently unwanted accusations of [right-wing radicalism](#) – the death knell for any mainstream party in Germany – have affected elements of the party leadership. A happy conflation of Eurozone opposition and middle-class anxiety has worked in the AfD's favour this autumn.

In the long term, however, support from a more populist, right leaning voting base could [conflict](#) with the party elite's foreign-policy focus on a market-oriented external economic policy. Unless the AfD can reconcile this fundamental conflict, the likely outcome is party implosion. Whether it survives over the longer term or not, the AfD is sure to exert

pressure on the CDU's Eurozone policies, to the benefit of conservative critics within the CDU.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

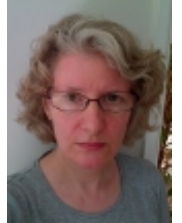
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### **About the author**

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